

HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF GERMANY AND AUSTRIA 15TH CENTURY

Towards the end of the 14th century, Jewish life in Germany and Austria had revived. However, it became only a shadow of its former greatness and influence. Too many Jews had died, and too many communities had been ravaged for any easy restoration of normative Jewish life to occur.

Several rabbinic leaders attempted to help rebuild Jewish life in Central Europe. R. Shalom of Neustadt was born in Vienna in the early 14th century. He later gained fame as the rabbi of Wiener-Neustadt. He was called “The Prince” by his contemporaries, a description of his character, his pre-eminence in halacha, and the addition of a companion title (HaSar) to his name Shalom - Prince of Peace. Many of the next generation’s great scholars were his disciples, chief among them the Maharil. Maharil, the acknowledged halachic authority of his day, often quoted R. Shalom in his works and considered his customs and decisions to be binding.

R. Yom Tov Lipman Milhausen was the chief rabbinic judge (dayan) in Prague during the late 14th and early 15th centuries. He published a fiery defense of Judaism against Christian accusations, This Sefer HaNitzachon was a refutation of Scriptural proofs offered in support of Christianity. For fear of reprisals from the Church, the book was kept in manuscript form and handed down from generation to generation to be used only in cases of disputation. Finally a monk seized a copy of this work in 1644, translated it and published it with his notes. This work was so very powerful and influential that it served as the basis of tens of Church books attempting to refute it. The Church was ultimately so fearful of this work’s cogent arguments that a papal edict forbade Jews to even keep it in their possession.

In 1399 R. Yom Tov, together with many other Jews, was arrested and thrown into prison. This was done at the instigation of a Jewish apostate called Peter who accused them of insulting Christianity in their writings. R.

Yom Tov brilliantly refuted Peter's accusations at the resulting trial. Nevertheless, his co-defendants, some 80 in number, were condemned to death and executed. Only R. Yom Tov managed to escape.

R. Yom Tov had many students and was a recognized halachic authority. He was also a Kabbalist whose book on the hidden Kabbalistic meanings and forms of the Hebrew alphabet (Alfa Beisa) was widely popular. It was even accepted as accurate by the Torah scholars of his day. He was also an interpreter of prayers, and wrote a commentary on the liturgical poem, Shir HaYichud.

Another rabbi of note was R. Yitzchak Tirnau (c1365-c1428) who was a rav in Bohemia. He wrote a review of Ashkenazic customs and halachic decisions (Minhagim LeChol HaShanah) which became the basis for resurrecting Ashkenazic Jewish life at the beginning of the 15th century. This work became a popular code and was often cited by subsequent codifiers in later centuries. This work was later overshadowed by the more popular book of Maharil. A popular legend relates that R. Yitzchak's daughter was kidnapped by a duke who subsequently became a sincere convert to Judaism.

The greatest rav of Ashkenazic Jewry in the early 15th century was R. Yaakov HaLevi Moelin (1365-1427). He was the principal disciple of R. Shalom of Neustadt. The Maharil (acronym for Moreinu HaRav Yaakov Levi) was the leading halachic authority, especially in regards to customs and synagogue ritual. He lived in Mainz and Worms and almost single handedly restored traditional halachic life to the damaged communities of Ashkenaz. He meticulously recorded all of the customs and halachic opinions that governed Ashkenazic Jewry till his day, and ultimately became the chief conduit of Ashkenazic tradition to the emerging Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. His authoritative halachic code, Minhagei Maharil, is quoted extensively by the Rema in his monumental work on the Shulchan Aruch.

Maharil lived during trying times. In 1420 he witnessed the mass slaughter of the Jews of Austria, which he then referred to as “the land of blood” in his responsa. In that year a long simmering dispute between the Hussites, (followers of John Huss and a forerunner to the later Protestant Reformation) and the Roman Catholics burst out into the open. The clergy looked upon this as the Devil’s own work, and the rumor was spread that the Jews were behind the affair and were supplying the Hussites with arms and money. The Jews were also accused of having bribed a Christian woman to steal a sacred wafer which they tortured and mocked. The poorer Jewish inhabitants of Vienna were deprived of all they had, and were then set adrift in oarless boats on the Danube. The wealthier ones were killed, some being burned alive in a huge bonfire on the outskirts of the city. All the property of the Jews was taken over by the town council, though the king also received a substantial share. The stones of the destroyed synagogue were then presented to the university for a new building. This was a token of gratitude for the part the students had played in organizing the riots. For about a century there were no Jews in Vienna, and the Christian merchants had the trade of the city to themselves.

The Hussite war lasted for sixteen years, after which the Hussites were finally exterminated by the Church. Yet in 1421, when the Hussite wars first broke out into the open, it brought nothing but misery and suffering to the Jews of Bavaria and the Rhine. The Jewish community of Wiener-Neustadt was completely destroyed, and dozens of other Jewish communities were devastated. Again thousands of Jews perished because of an internecine Christian war. As a result, Jews fled eastward, and the ancient strongholds of Ashkenazic Jewry in Central Europe were emptied. When the Jews appealed to Maharil to intercede with G-d, he proclaimed a three-day fast, and soon afterward the armies which had threatened the Jews dispersed, and even came to beg bread from them.

One of Maharil’s main disciples was R. Yaakov Weil (c1390-1455), known as Mahariv. R. Yaakov served as rabbi of Augsburg and Erfurt. Previously he had been offered the position of rav in Nuremberg, but declined it so as to avoid offending a scholar who resided in that town and

currently served in that capacity. He was considered to be the recognized rabbinic authority in Germany in his generation after the death of his mentor Maharil. Inquiries from all German communities were addressed to him. His book of responsa, known as Shealos VeTeshuvos Mahariv, was widely accepted. In particular, his opinions regarding the laws of kosher ritual slaughter were widely known and considered to be authoritative even by the Jews of Eastern Europe.

Additional Torah scholars from this time period attempted to stabilize Jewish life for the remnants of German and Austrian Jewry. R Yisrael Isserlein (1390-1460) was one of these. After the massacre at Neustadt in 1421, in which his mother and his teacher were killed, R. Yisroel fled to Italy and later to Marburg, Austria for a time. In 1445, he returned to Wiener-Neustadt where he founded a Talmudic academy and attracted many students. R. Yisroel was a humble, peaceable person who readily replied to all halachic inquiries. His most famous scholarly work, Terumas HaDeshen, was a compilation of 354 responsa in halacha. This work is considered to be a most authoritative halachic source, and its decisions are frequently cited by later authorities, particularly Maharshah. Even though R. Yisroel himself authored many of the questions posed in the responsa, the book enjoyed widespread circulation. It is quoted in most of the halachic works of the next century by the scholars of Polish Jewry.

A contemporary of R. Yisroel Isserlin was R. Yisroel Brunna (1400-1480). He had multiple teachers in his youth, and later studied under the two greatest German authorities of his time, R. Yaakov Weil and R. Yisroel Isserlein. R. Yisrael served as rabbi in Brunna, Moravia, until the Jews were expelled from that city in 1451. He then settled in Regensburg where he unfortunately antagonized R. Anshel who headed an academy there and considered R. Yisroel to be encroaching on his territory. At a later date Emperor Frederick III imprisoned R. Yisroel for refusing to issue a ban of excommunication against his fellow Jews who would not hand over one third of their wealth to the royal treasury. After a short prison term, R. Yisroel was released. In 1474 he was again imprisoned, this time on a ritual murder charge. After he was sentenced to die, the true murderer, a

Christian, confessed and was executed in his stead. Following this incident R. Yisroel left Germany and spent his remaining years in peace in Prague. He is known for his collection of responsa, an authoritative halachic source, which is frequently cited by Rama and other authorities.

Another rav. R. Moshe Mintz (1415-1485) was a direct link between the scholarship of Germany and the newly arising Torah center of Poland. He served as rabbi of Mainz, Landau, and Bamberg, and corresponded with the leading halachic authorities of Germany and Italy, including R. Yisroel Isserlein. During the persecutions in Mainz in 1462, he fled Mainz in the midst of a gruesome pogrom wherein most of his manuscripts were destroyed. Due to the slowly deteriorating conditions in Germany, he eventually made his way eastward to Posen, in Silesian Poland. There he taught many disciples and was a strong influence on the halachic growth of that community. He is one of the first known Torah personalities in Poland, and the first known to have officiated as Rav of a city in that country. Although he left Germany without his books, he continued writing responsa citing previous authorities from memory. A part of his responsa has been preserved and published under the title Shealos U'Teshuvos Maharam Mintz.

Another famed rabbi who contributed to the remnants of 15th century German and Austrian Jewry was R. Yaakov Landau (c1410-c1487). From his native Germany, he moved to Italy, residing in Naples and Pavia. In 1480 he wrote Agur, a basic text of Ashkenazic custom and practice. It was often cited by later Polish halachic authorities, including Rema in his notes on Shulchan Aruch.

Throughout the latter 14th century and 15th century, German Jewry lost its primary place in the Ashkenazic world as a result of plagues, pogroms, and emigration. It would remain vibrant for many more centuries, but the main leadership of Ashkenazic Jewry passed eastward. Jewish Poland would build upon its German heritage, but it would also transform and enhance it, making Jewish life, language, and custom richer and more creative than ever.

For those Jews who remained in Germany, life was extremely challenging and confining. Merchants and artisans refused to have them as competitors. Even money lending was now wholly a monopoly of the Christian bankers. Here and there a Jew could still be found with enough capital to lend to the city council when the city treasury was temporarily empty. It was a dangerous transaction, because a city could always find an excuse to expel all the Jews, and thus avoid the need for repayment. The most available means for warning their livelihood, therefore, was peddling and making loans of very small sums to workmen or students. Out of the earnings from such petty business transactions, the Jews had to pay enormous taxes and imposts which were the condition of their continued stay in the towns. As a result the vast majority of the Jews of Central Europe were reduced to abject poverty.

The only avenue open to the Jews was to migrate eastward. Slowly the lands lying east of the Elbe River entered the circle of European civilization. Ever since the 12th century, the Germans had been pushing their way into Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland. At first they made short thrift of the Slavic population, slaughtering and enslaving them, and taking land away from their rightful owners. When that was no longer possible, Germans migrated into those territories and established themselves as merchants and artisans. Fleeing before their persecutors, the Jews also found in in these partially developed lands an opportunity to establish new homes and to found new communities.